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A Circle Away

Tamsie Weems Short Story

The first time I heard about the Rec Room I figured "Rec" must be short for recreational. There is a pool table, ping-pong table, and a television set in it, but I've never seen the tables used for anything except to lay food on, and the TV only picks up PBS. I figure "Rec" must stand for rectangular. It is that. Rectangular I mean. A huge yellow room with textured wallpaper and green-gold, institutional carpet.

Most of the inmates here go down there and sit on colorful molded plastic chairs in circles to talk when they get bored. Imagine that! Bored in a mental institution. I go there often.

For three weeks, I just stood around and observed the goings-on in the rectangular room. There are rules in even the most obtuse forms of society. My sociology professor carved that in one of my brain cells. At the time, I resented it as useless, ugly graffiti, but he was right. First of all, the chairs are divided into three circles with ten or fifteen chairs in each. A new person could not join a circle until he was invited and he did not dare to decline gracefully when invited. At no time was there any interchange of members between the three groups, except for rare trade-off deals between circle leaders. Circle members came and went during the day, but were expected to show up at least once a day unless they were room-bound (by illness, visitors, or a new box of chocolates). Circle leaders were whoever was the loudest, bossiest, and craziest in any assembled group at any given time. Therefore, the circle leaders were different people at different times of the day.

I stayed all day the day I was finally asked to join a circle and counted all of the members. There were twenty including myself, and in that day, there were three group leaders. All day long, they told I'm-not-crazy/why-I'm-in-a-mental-hospital stories; and I listened.

The fat lady with gray pigtailed and a mole on the side of her nose isn't crazy. One night, however, the devil told her to take off all her clothes, meet her ex-husband at a small cafe with red-checked curtains and tablecloths, and stab him to death with a vegetable peeler. What really scares me is that she and the devil can't figure out why the poor fat man didn't die.

The skinny man in bell-bottoms, with long, stringy hair and peace beads who shuffles his feet when he walks up and down the stark halls, isn't crazy either—just a wilted flower-child. The drugs he did back in the '70s fried his brain like an egg over-easy.

"Hey, man. It's like I'm not crazy; I'm just in love. I love Buddha. I love you. And, hey, I really LOVE Richard Nixon. It's like. We have the same karma, man, you know what I mean?"

He sways and sings: "I'd like to teach the world to sing. In perfect harmony. I'd like to buy the world some coke. And keep it company."

"Bernstein, please! You know how my Harry hates that song. There, there, Darling. He's quiet now." A tall, thin lady with an Eleanor Roosevelt hairdo patted the empty space above the chair beside her on the arm. Bernie burst into tears and two tired men in white carried him away.

Annie, oblivious to his tears, smooths her curtain-floral dress and blinks self-consciously. She isn't demented, but the ghost of her WWII husband, Harry, is. She followed him around the streets of her small hometown, carrying some defunct hand-grenades in a Big Star bag for nearly thirty-five years. One day, some nosy kid peeked inside the bag; the next, Sheriff Cooper, an old friend of Harry's, came and took Harry to the hospital. Naturally, Annie followed.

There were many stories. Listening to them was part of my initiation into the circle. The other part was telling my story. After several I'm-not-crazy stories, I decided I was. Crazy that is. Today they looked expectantly at me and fear of riot alone prodded me to speak.

"I am crazy."

The 3:00-5:00 circle leader frowned and a fat, hairless dude who looked like Curly of "The Three Stooges" laughed uncontrollably. I stared solemnly at their somewhat sweaty faces and compressed my lips. Curly wiped the tears from his eyes, and I continued.

It all began Homecoming weekend when I decided not to go to the game. Alone in the five-story residence hall, my imagination ran wild. It occurred to me that Libyan terrorists might take the dorm hostage in order to gain international attention. I could see the headlines:

LIBYAN TERRORISTS CAPTURE GIRLS DORMITORY

Meanwhile the American Embassy in Beirut was annihilated by another PLO group. After all, embassy attacks were becoming as frequent as Billy Graham crusades. Folks were beginning to flip channels whenever they even heard the word "embassy," but a captured dormitory? That would be new.

I began looking for places to hide, under the bed, behind the door, in the closet. It was no use. They would look in all those places. I hate puzzles so I gave it up until I found out that Carol knew how to get to the roof.

Carol, a miniature sumo wrestler who sleeps all day and stays awake all night, wouldn't tell me how to get to the roof without a good reason. The truth of the matter was, I simply wanted to know. That wasn't, however, what I told Carol.

"Carol, I need to know how to get to the roof in case Libyan terrorists attack the dorm. Then I could go there and be safe."

Carol roared. My lie amused her so much, in fact, that she divulged her secret out of sheer appreciation for my sense of humor. Getting to the roof, however, required either skill in picking locks, or a great deal of premeditation and planning.

"It's no use," said lazy me.

Three weeks later, Carol tapped on my door and told me another way to get to the roof—the elevator escape hatch. When the elevator was on the fifth floor, a person on top of the elevator could crawl onto the roof. I liked it. But I was sure the Libyans would kill the elevator first. Deep down in their sadistic hearts, they feel that everyone should have to take the stairs, especially fat people. There seemed to be no place to hide so I pushed the Libyans from my mind.

It surprised me a little, one month later, when Carol stood at the foot of my elevated, metal bed, leaned forward on her elbows, and said:

"You should climb out the window."

"Hunh?"

"If Libyan terrorists attacked."

"Carol," I did not look up from my French book, "I live on the fourth floor."

"I KNOW THAT." I looked up and saw that her brows had become one brown line of disgust.

"There's a ledge."

She was right. Two feet below each window was a ledge.

"Hey! You're right." I began reading my French book again.

"You should practice."

"OK."

"On the second floor."

"OK."

"On the side where it is at ground level."

"OK."

"Bye."

"Bye."

Carol closed the door softly behind her and I fell asleep. Twenty minutes later, I woke up and was relieved to see the Libyan firing squad (which spoke fluent French) become a poster of Buckingham Palace guards.

Macrame rope lay on my roommate's desk beneath the poster and my brain clicked. Practice . . . Practice . . . Practice. I tied one end of the rope to the door knob and locked the door. The other end, I wrapped around my waist and made a Girl Scout slip-knot. After pushing the 1' x 2' window open, I oozed through the slanted space and squatted on the ledge. Perfect. But I couldn't get back in.

After several minutes of frustrated effort, I heaved one great sigh, and uttered my strongest expletive.

"Rats!"

Ever-alert Campus Security spied me (or heard me) and went berserk in spite of my friendly waves and yoo-hoos. Meanwhile, HopSing (my roommate) unlocked the door, the macrame rope slacked, and we both screamed. With some effort, I hauled myself back onto the ledge and planted my feet securely on the buff colored concrete. Five minutes later, two firetrucks, three squad cars, and two ambulances stood outside my window. The dorm-mama, four resident assistants, a psychology major, and a youth minister were parked inside my room. Everyone was screaming, "DON'T JUMP!" with the exception of HopSing who was simply screaming and Tim, the youth minister, who was asking if he could have the wool overcoat I had bought at a second-hand store. No one even heard me say I had no intention of jumping anywhere.

After several vain attempts to jerk me in the tiny window, the firemen spread a net below and everyone chanted:

"JUMP. JUMP. JUMP. JUMP!"

Again, no one heard me say I had absolutely no intention of jumping anywhere. Finally, some one cut the macrame rope and Tim gently shoved me off the ledge.

The next thing I knew, I was here, in the hospital. A nurse with cold hands patted my warm head and told me I had been diagnosed as suicidal and had to live here for awhile. Here I am.

The group stirred and sighed. Curly was crying pathetically. A few others shook their heads back and forth. Most were asleep.

"At least here I'm safe from the Libyans," I added brightly, and the circle was quiet.

A few feet away, in another circle, a short, dark man with an accent began his story.

"I am not crazy. I am Libyan terrorist. One day it occur to me that those Embassy deals weren't drawing crowd like they usta . . . 'Captain,' I says, 'why don't we capture dormitory...' " □

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